

Aiming high and falling low (Proverbs 25:6-7; Luke 14:1, 7-14)

Proverbs warns us against the culture of self-aggrandizement.

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Of the many sins of the builders of Babel, one of the most egregious is also one of the least remarked upon: they build the city, and the tower within it, in hopes of “making a name for [them]selves” (Genesis 11:4). Like many real estate tycoons in our own time, these primordial builders wish to have standing and be famous. But God, as we know, will have none of it. God confounds their speech so that they cannot understand one another and cannot bring their plans to fruition. And then God disperses them.

In the very next chapter, God appears to Abram and makes him a series of dramatic promises. “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you,” God says; and then God adds: “I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing” (12:2). Part of the power of God’s promise to Abraham lies in the stark contrast it represents with what precedes it: a name is something to be granted by God, not pursued in quest of self-glorification.

It hardly needs saying that we live in a culture positively addicted to self-promotion. People speak without irony of their personal “brands”; like the builders of Babel, they (we?) are out to make a name for themselves. “All publicity is good publicity,” I’ve heard it said, as if having lost any capacity for embarrassment is something to be proud of. Many clergy I know struggle with the lure of this market-driven idolatry: they find themselves, often despite themselves, measuring their worth in terms of

clicks and likes.

The book of Proverbs warns us against the culture of self-aggrandizement: “Do not exalt yourself in the king’s presence,” we are admonished; “Do not stand in the place of nobles.” Why? “For it is better to be told, ‘Step up here,’ than to be degraded in the presence of the great.”

The key point here is not to avoid the halls of power at all costs; the point, rather, is to avoid turning the pursuit of power and prestige into an idol. As the Bible scholar Richard Clifford observes, “Honor is given, not taken.” Don’t push; wait until you are called.

On one level, the advice is practical: those who aim for the heights are often brought low. Yet on another level, the advice is also theological-spiritual: The Hebrew rendered here as “do not exalt yourself” is *al tithadar*, which literally means do not see yourself as magnificent or having splendor (*hadar*). Arrogance goes hand in hand with forgetting about God: Who needs God to grant us a name when we can earn one ourselves?

The juxtaposition in Genesis makes much the same point: striving to be famous is ultimately usurping a prerogative that belongs to God. Pursue goodness, not fame.

Jesus is a good reader of Proverbs. If you seek the seat of honor at a banquet, he observes, you may well end up being humiliated. Stand back, don’t assume too much. “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

In the same vein, the Talmudic Sages teach that “one who humbles himself, the Blessed Holy One raises up, and one who exalts himself, the Blessed Holy One humbles; from him who seeks greatness, greatness flees, but him who flees from greatness, greatness follows” (BT, Eruvin 13b). Both Jesus and the Sages offer guidance that is at once practical—aim too high and you’ll end up low; lay low and you’ll end up ranked high—and theological-spiritual: be careful, because the pursuit of honor may well destroy your soul.